Culture, Conflict and Proxy Wars: A Macro Clash of Civilizations?

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Samuel Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations" (CoC) thesis remains one of the most controversial theoretical models in International Relations. The article *The Clash of Civilizations* published in *Foreign Affairs* in 1993 remains one of the most cited in the journal's history (Bolks and Stoll, 2003) and twenty-three years later articles and books continue to discuss the merits and shortcomings of the model. Despite generating extensive academic discourse, the literature largely focuses only on the "micro" aspect of the civilizational clash. Typically, studies focus on the role of local religious and cultural factors in the onset of conflict (Basedau et al, 2011; Charron, 2010; Chiozza, 2002) or on its escalation (Gartzke and Gleditisch, 2006). Rarely discussed is the second category of conflict outlined: the conflict occurring at a "macro" level between leading states. The CoC model outlines a multipolar world, with leading powers from each civilization competing in a manner that resembles the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, with competition for relative global political and economic power (1993, p.29). Conflict at this level can be conceptualised by observing the sponsorship of "proxies". The CoC model would expect to see states sponsoring actors that share their civilization, in order to achieve local hegemony and contribute to the global standing of their culture.

For this end, I have selected two case studies: the conflict between Israel and Palestine, and the conflict in Colombia. These cases were selected using the Uppsala Conflict Data Program External Actor dataset based upon the frequency of external support between the end of the Cold War and 2009. With these criteria the conflict that saw the most cases of external support was the Israel/Palestinian conflict (2014). This is also an insightful case as, due to several of the conflict actors identifying as Islamist groups, it covers the most controversial aspect of Huntington's model: the "bloody borders" of Islam (1993, p.35). The conflict in Colombia has the joint-second most cases of external support (Uppsala Conflict Data Program, 2014) and also provides a useful counterpoint to the first case as it takes place in the Latin American civilization. This civilization is infrequently discussed in the context of the CoC model so will make a useful case to test the applicability of the model.

Both cases reveal civilizational factors have little to do with the sponsorship of "proxies". External actor involvement is here primarily motivated by pragmatic geopolitical considerations and ideological commitments. Moreover, both conflicts demonstrate that while culture may continue to play a role in international politics, it is not in the manner than Huntington envisioned. While Huntington predicted local cultural differences would be subordinated to civilizational identity, both Israel/Palestine and Colombia illustrate these differences are still in effect (1993).

The Clash of Civilizations and Proxy Wars

The Clash of Civilizations was developed as an attempt to predict the geopolitical landscape of the Post-Cold War world. Huntington theorised the end of the Cold War marked a transition into a new stage of human history that would see the globe increasingly divided along cultural lines into "civilizations". A civilization was described as the largest cultural entity, defined primarily by a commonality of culture (1993, pp.23-24). As social and economic change weakened local and national identities, people would come to increasingly identify with their civilizational identity (Huntington, 1993, p.25), resulting in "people and countries with similar cultures are coming together. People and countries with different cultures are coming apart" (Huntington, 1997, p.125). While Huntington is somewhat

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ambiguous about where precisely the boundaries fall, he outlined nine principle civilizations: Western, Sinic, Orthodox, Islamic, Latin American, Hindi, Buddhist, Japanese and African (Charron, 2010, p.109).

Huntington predicted that a "clash" between these civilizations was inevitable due to their incompatibility; while in previous conflicts of class and ideology the question had been "which side are you on?" the question in CoC is "what are you?" (1993, p.27). Huntington envisioned conflict between the civilizations taking place on two levels. The first was "micro" level conflict in communities on the "fault lines" between civilizations (1993, p.29). The second was "macro" level conflict, which he characterised as:

"States from different civilizations compete for relative military and economic power, struggle over the control of international institutions and third parties, and competitively promote their particular political and religious values" (1993, p.29).

The depiction of conflict as on this level closely resembles commotion during the Cold War, with bipolar ideological conflict between superpowers replaced by a multipolar cultural conflict between civilizations.

While the CoC model has gained a measure of acceptance in official circles (Marsden, 2012) and has been supported by writers such as Nicholas Charron (2010), the majority of academic literature has been critical of Huntington's thesis. Numerous studies have found an inconclusive link between divergent culture and conflict (Bolks and Stoll, 2003; Ellis, 2010) and some writers such as Erik Gartzke and Kristian Gleditsch found an inverse relationship between conflict and cultural differences, concluding we should "turn the clash of civilizations thesis on its head" (2006, p.77). The vast majority of these studies focus exclusively on the micro level of CoC, overlooking the macro element of the model.

This is perhaps due to the fact macro level conflict between civilizations is difficult to conceptualise. However, the sponsorship of "proxies" provides a simple and empirically demonstrable measure to capture this conflict. Proxy warfare is described by Geraint Hughes as where:

"belligerents use third parties as either a supplementary means of waging war or as a substitute for direct employment of their own armed forces" (2012, p.2).

The employment of proxies is seen to stem from a desire to avoid a destructive conventional or nuclear confrontation, or when political or economic factors make the commitment of regular military forces problematic. For 40 years following 1948, the USA and USSR conducted numerous proxy wars against each other. Notable Cold War examples of this phenomenon include Soviet support of the North Vietnamese government and American sponsorship of the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan. While proxies have at times been portrayed simply as puppets of their sponsors, it is important to note that the relationship between the two is not always as simple as it seems (Marshal, 2016, p.185).

While proxy warfare is often seen as synonymous with the Cold War, the use of proxies has dramatically increased since 1989. Alex Marshall describes the use of proxies in contemporary conflicts as "endemic" (2016, p.183). Seyom Brown attributes this increase in proxy sponsorship to an emergent "polyarchic" global system that he characterises as a "highly interactive and interdependent, yet decentralized, system of many kinds of actors, large and small, state and nonstate" (2016, p.244). The transition from a monopolar world of US hegemony, to one in which many different actors are becoming increasingly important, appears to align with the CoC model. While few would argue that a multipolar world has truly emerged, the diffusion of power away from the US and the West to local and regional actors conforms to Huntington's prediction of a decline of Western dominance as a result of rising civilizations, such as that of China and India (1993, p.23).

However, much of the literature on proxy warfare is keen to downplay the role that culture or religion plays on the decision of states to sponsor proxies. Hughes states that the key factor in the sponsorship of proxies is a pragmatic interest in weakening or destroying a mutual enemy; concerns such as ideology, religion, culture, ethnicity and nationalism are all subordinated to this goal (2012, p.12). Moreover, the CoC model assumes the objectives and

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goals of the same civilizational group will inherently converge due to a shared cultural understanding. Both Brown and Marshal stress that a simplistic interpretations of the proxy-patron relationship should be avoided as their goals can, and have, diverged significantly (Brown 2016, p.255; Marshal 2016, p.185). As illustrated in both cases, proxy sponsorship rarely stems solely from civilizational factors.

Case 1: Israel/Palestine

Confrontations between the Jewish state of Israel and its Arab Muslim neighbours have been frequent since Israel's establishment in 1948. The most enduring of these conflicts has been that between the Israeli state and dissident Palestinian groups in the territories of Gaza and the West Bank. This conflict has seen constant involvement of external actors. The Uppsala PRIO External Actor database lists 70 cases of external aid to a conflict party between the end of the Cold War and 2009 (2014). The principle external actor has been the USA, which has lent extensive military, financial and political support to the Israeli government. On the Palestinian side, Iran and Syria have provided support for multiple militant groups; the focus of this essay will be Hamas. For many, this conflict is indicative of CoC manifesting; Pascal Boniface characterised the conflict as "the epicentre of a potential clash of civilizations" (2004, p.8). However, examining the Israeli-US and Hamas-Iranian-Syrian relationship finds little definitive evidence that a macro level "clash" is actually occurring. While there are certainly elements of a cultural/religious confrontation in this conflict, these concerns appear to have often been subordinated to alternate concerns.

The closeness of US-Israeli relations is well known. Blained Holt describes this relationship as the "Gold Standard" of its type; the envy of strategic planners around the world (2014, p.111). Half of all external interventions in the conflict were support from the United States to the Israeli government (Uppsala Conflict Data Program, 2014), part of a continuing trend since the 1970s that has seen Israel become the largest recipient of US security assistance. Over $22 billion dollars was received in aid during the Bush administration alone (Berrigan, 2009, p.6). To put this figure into context, between 1998 and 2008 US contributions made up a third of Israel's entire defence budget, a level of aid that Frida Berrigan describes as astonishing (2009, p.8). At least, if not more significant than this financial support is the preferential political treatment that Israel receives. This is demonstrated by the fact that America has employed its Security Council veto 37 times to prevent the ratification of resolutions condemning Israel (Boniface, 2004, p.13). The support provided by the US has enabled Israel to become and remain the region's preeminent military power, while enabling it to escape sanctions from the international community.

Is this relationship a product of macro civilizational policy? Israel undoubtedly shares similar cultural traits with the United States such as shared Judeo-Christian heritage and commitment to democratic systems of governance. Holt states President Truman officially recognised Israel in the 1940s in part due to the perceived closeness of the two states' culture (2014, p.114). However, Huntington does not class Israel as a member of the Western civilization. Israel is repeatedly referred to as a non-Western state, but no alternate categorization is provided. It seems probable that Huntington saw Israel as the sole member of a Hebrew civilization. This exposes the arbitrary nature of Huntington's civilizational categorisation; no clear criteria are provided for membership of a civilization, undermining his assertion that the divides between civilizations are "real"(1993, p24).

If we are to award Israel honorary Western membership, the relationship still does not conform neatly with the CoC model. Holt states the bottom line in the alliance is the region is too strategically important for America not to have a staunch ally. Israel meanwhile is dependent on the US to guarantee its security (2014, p.115). This echoes Hughes' depiction of proxy sponsorship as primarily a pragmatic measure (2012, p.12). Furthermore, Israel's relationship with the USA, and the West in general, has been complex and at times hostile. The repeated failure of Middle East peace initiatives has led to the frustration and hostility of many Western governments, even the United States. French foreign policy in particular is unpopular with Israel as it is considered too "pro-Arab" (Boniface, 2004, p.10). The complexity of this relationship is further underscored by the fact that Israel is the second largest supplier of weapons to China, certainly a member of a different civilization and America's chief economic rival (Boniface, 2004, p.10). A cursory glance at the US-Israel relationship would see apparent confirmation of the CoC model; after a more detailed examination, this is not so clear.

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Syrian and Iranian support for Hamas features as the second most frequent case of external actor support with 11 recorded incidences (Uppsala Conflict Data Program, 2014). Since the 1980s, Iran has dedicated a significant amount of energy to building an "Axis of Resistance" around the Middle East to promote its interests (Frankel, 2012, p.53). This has led to a close Iranian-Syrian relationship, as well as support for militant groups including Hamas. Extensive financial support has been given to Hamas, such as the $50 million Iranian support package announced in 2006. It is unclear exactly how much of the aid received by Hamas goes towards the operation of the Palestinian Administration and how much goes to group's militant wing, but it has also been alleged that Iran has provided military training for Hamas militants.

Syria has also provided support for Hamas, providing them with financial and political aid, such as office space in Damascus (Uppsala Conflict Data Program, 2014). Iran has consistently used Hamas as a bargaining chip with Israel and the United States, notably when military strikes were threatened against its Nuclear program (Ekmekci, 2011, p.130), while Syria has used Hamas as a proxy to damage Israel while avoiding a conventional military conflict it was almost certain to lose (Frankel, 2012, p.59).

This sponsorship of a militant Islamist group by two Muslim states seems to closely align with the CoC model, with the fact this relationship bridges the Sunni/Shi'a divide within Islam being particularly notable (Ekmekci, 2011, p.129). This seems to confirm Huntington's prediction that local and national identities will break down in favour of broader civilizational culture (1993, p.25-26). Even more significant, this relationship also bridges a historical ethnic divide between Persians and Arabs, which has traditionally split the region (Hughes, 2012, p.29). Rola El Hussini depicts this reconciliation as a mutual rejection of US and Israeli hegemony in the region (2010, p.812). This all seems to be evidence of macro level competition between Iran representing the Islamic civilization, and the USA representing the Western civilization. This also supports Huntington's prediction that conflict is most likely between Islam and the West (1993).

Before conclusions are reached however, it should be again noted the proxy-sponsor relationship is more motivated primarily by pragmatic strategic factors. Iran continues to experience extreme hostility from many other Muslim states, notably Saudi Arabia, undermining the claim that regional differences are breaking down. Moreover, the pragmatic nature of the proxy-sponsor relationship was shown when Hamas eagerly abandoning its support for the Assad regime following the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War (Frankel, 2012, p.59). Strangely, Huntington himself cites "subcivilizational" factors preventing Iran becoming a "core state" of the Islamic civilization, despite the fact this contradicts his assertion that these elements are losing their prevalence (1997, p.137).

Faruk Ekmekci states the Iranian Hamas alliance "is more about geopolitics and security than ideology and religion" (2011, p.129), a sentiment which is echoed by Rafaeld Frankel who argues "Hamas' relationship with…. Iran was more a marriage of convenience than true ideological kinship" (2012, p.59). While this relationship conforms to the CoC model, this seems more a coincidence than a genuine civilizational motivation.

Case 2: Colombia

The case of the conflict in Colombia offers an interesting comparison to the Israel/Palestine conflict. While Huntington broadly outlines a Latin American civilization spanning most of South and Central America, he gives this civilization little further thought. This is especially evident when contrasted with the amount of attention given to the Islamic, Western and Orthodox civilizations. In the chapter "the Cultural Reconfiguration of Global Politics" in which Huntington describes the shape and character of the world's civilizations, only a short paragraph is dedicated to Latin America. Vaguely, Colombian, Venezuelan and Mexican economic cooperation is mentioned and used as evidence of closer integration across Latin America (1997, p.127).

The principle external actor in the Colombian conflict is again the USA, providing support for the Colombian government. The second is the government of Venezuela who have provided assistance to the left-wing rebel group the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, commonly known as FARC (Uppsala Conflict Data Program, 2014). It is difficult to find any evidence of a macro level civilizational conflict occurring here. In fact, the Colombian conflict appears to closer resemble a typical ideological conflict of the Cold War rather than a new CoC cultural struggle.

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Colombia has come to be seen as a key US ally in South America and has become a major site of US militarism in the region. This relationship parallels Israeli-US relations in many ways, so much so that the former Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez referred to Colombia as the "Israel of America" (Rochlin, 2011, p.715). Washington first provided assistance to Colombia in the 1960s with "Plan Laso", which involved the re-organisation and increased training of its military in order to combat Communist insurgent forces. This support has since increased exponentially (Rochlin, 2011, p.243). In much of the first decade of the twenty-first century Colombia was the third largest recipient of American military aid, following only Israel and Egypt (Stokes, 2004, p.25), and the US State Department figures for international aid to Colombia show a total of $324,817,000 in 2014. This amount is significantly more than any other nation in the western hemisphere, with only aid to Haiti approaching this figure. While much less than aid to Israel this is still a truly massive figure, demonstrated by the fact that it only slightly falls short of the aid to Iraq in the same period (2015, p.16-17).

It is difficult to find evidence of clashing civilizations in this relationship. Colombia is clearly a culturally Latin American state. Any criteria that would characterise it as Western would also necessitate the re-categorisation of the majority of Central and South American states, severely undermining the viability of the entire model. Moreover, the chief enemies of the Colombian government are ideologically motivated guerrillas and criminal drug cartels. US opposition to these groups can hardly be said to be motivated by civilizational factors and US support for Colombia is often portrayed by scholars and the media as ideologically motivated. James Rochlin states a large part of US interest in Colombia is in using it as a military staging point to combat "leftist" forces (2011, p.258), while William Aviles states this relationship is motivated by an American desire to maintain a global Neoliberal agenda (2005, p.258). Doug Stokes states this relationship is motivated by exactly the same factors as it was during the Cold War and depicts it simply as a continuation of the well-known US policy of containment (2004, p.2).

Another factor motivating US military commitment to Colombia is the "War on Drugs". Since the 1980s the US has tried (and failed) to eradicate the supply of illicit drugs and Colombia is a priority as one of the globe's largest producers of cocaine (Stokes, 2004, p.87). The War on Drugs spans South America, as shown by George Bush Senior's cross-Andean initiative that included Colombia, Ecuador, Bolivia and Peru (Rochlin, 2011, p.721). This further undermines any claim that US support for Colombia has a civilizational element by illustrating US willingness to sponsor a range of Latin American governments in service of the War on Drugs. Furthermore, American dedication to this policy is such that it has been willing to subordinate its ideological commitment to Colombia. During the 1990s America "decertified" the Colombian government on suspicion it was complicit in the drugs trade (Rochlin, 2011, p.772). Even if a civilizational link could be established between Colombia and the US, this relationship is considered less important than a policy largely motivated by domestic politics. This further undermines Huntington's prediction that cultural commonality would be the principle driving force behind interstate relations.

The sponsorship of the rebel group FARC by the Venezuelan government also demonstrates the ideological nature of the Colombian conflict. FARC is the longest surviving and most entrenched revolutionary group in all of the Americas and for most of its history has been largely self-sufficient (Eccarius-Kelly, 2012, p.236). However, Colombia has consistently accused Venezuela of supporting the group, support which allegedly increased with the election of the left-wing president Hugo Chávez in 1999. Extensive FARC records captured by the Colombian military in 2008 revealed frequent collaboration with the Venezuelan government (BBC, 2011). The aid provided to FARC is reported to have consisted of access to territory, financial resources and weaponry (Uppsala Conflict Data Program, 2014). Venezuela has allegedly provided guerrillas with "safe havens" from the Colombian military, assisted them in acquiring arms and even employed members of FARC as "professional hit men" for the government, although many of these claims remain lack evidence and are vigorously denied by the Venezuelan government (Eccarius-Kelly, 2012, p.249).

Venezuelan support for FARC could be seen as conforming to the CoC model. The International Institute for Strategic Studies, the body responsible for analysing the documents captured by the Colombian military in 2008, states the relationship was partly due to a desire by the Venezuelan government to create a strategic ally in the region against the United States (BBC, 2011). Relations between the United States and the Chávez administration were consistently hostile. An attempted coup in 2002 was alleged to have been supported or even orchestrated by the American government (Clement, 2005, p.60). It is possible this hostility could be attributed to a civilizational

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"clash" as Venezuela and the US stem from different civilizations, but ideological differences are more apparent here than cultural ones. Rochlin portrays the rivalry between Venezuela and US-backed Colombia as a Cold War style ideological conflict rather than stemming from cultural or religious factors (2011, p.258).

This is illustrated by the fact that the Post-Cold War rhetoric of FARC lines up closely with that of Chávez in Venezuela (Rochlin, 2011, p.722). Alexandra Nariño, a leading FARC spokesperson, states one of the group's core motivations is combating "neoliberal aggression against the people of Colombia", a sentiment that aligns closely with Chávez's frequent condemnation of globalised Capitalism (Nariño, 2014, p.222). A key element of Huntington's thesis is that the ideological conflicts of the twentieth century would be replaced by conflicts of culture and both American support for Colombia and Venezuelan support for FARC contradicts this (1993, p.23).

Furthermore, antagonism between Colombia and Venezuela again demonstrates that local cultural differences are not being superseded by civilizational identities. Huntington saw civilizations rising to the forefront of global politics due to a basic shared culture that is a product of centuries (1993, p.25). However, both Colombia and Venezuela share near-identical cultural heritages. Both experienced centuries of Spanish colonial rule, and both have been democratic since 1958 with relatively liberal economies (Stokes, 2004, p.34). Their rivalry stems principally from divergent developmental paths taken since independence, leading to ideological polarisation as opposed to a fundamental cultural divide (Rochlin, p.237). This directly contradicts the importance the CoC model places on culture defining post-Cold War international relations.

Conclusion

The Israel/Palestine and the Colombian conflict both expose several serious shortcomings in Huntington's thesis. The involvement of external actors in the Middle East conforms to the model at a superficial level, but when examined in more detail this is less certain. Furthermore, the case of Colombia not only demonstrates little evidence of civilizations clashing, but it also illustrates the narrow focus of Huntington's work. A huge amount of attention is dedicated to the Islamic and Western civilizations, while relatively little thought is dedicated to Latin America; even less is given to Africa. Both Huntington's work, and qualitative studies supporting it, have been criticized for focus on relatively few cases that conform to the CoC model (Gartzke and Gledistsch, 2006, p.57), which has resulted in sweeping generalisations.

Both cases have also shown that carving the world up into monolithic, amorphous civilizations is an incredibly simplistic process that cannot be justified by the erroneous assertion that local and regional cultural differences are disappearing. Stating that macro cultural differences are deeply engrained, while simultaneously arguing local cultural difference is losing its importance is a glaring contradiction, a have-your-cake-and-eat-it-too argument. The sponsorship of proxies in both cases is motivated by national interest and geopolitics; culture and religion are at best secondary considerations. The findings of this study point to a conclusion that a Macro Clash of Civilizations has not manifested, and does not look likely to manifest itself in the near future.

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